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Socioeconomic Inequality and Adjustments in Children's Perceptions of Their Agency as They Age in South Korea

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Abstract: This paper explores how children's perceptions of their agency, as something that is closely associated with its exercise, appear in relation to social structural factors, especially their socioeconomic positions, as they age. Using data from 862 10-18 year olds in South Korea, we examine how children's expressed optimism about their ability to achieve their occupational choices can conceal the impact of structural factors on their 'choices' and dispositions for (non-)action over time. Based on the findings, we argue for a more careful interpretation of children's sense of agency that recognises its propensity to continuously adjust in contexts of structural inequality.

Keywords: children's agency, inequality, occupational choices, adapted optimism, South Korea

Introduction

The impact of social structure on human agency has long been theorised and empirically explored. In particular, critical social theories highlight the impact of socioeconomic position on individuals' perceptions of their social worlds and dispositions for action which can translate into certain 'choices' and actions that contribute to maintaining the status quo (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1990b; Eyerman, 1981; Freire, 1996). Although the dominant focus of childhood studies has been on conceptualising children's agency based on their competence and/or rationality, in the last decade or so, attention has shifted towards the impact of structural and contextual factors to better take into account the complex processes underlying their choices and actions (Skattebol, Redmond & Zizzo, 2017; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Valentine, 2011). As a contribution to work in this latter tradition, this paper explores empirically how children's perceptions of their agency, as something that is closely associated with its exercise and outcomes, appear in relation to social structural factors, especially their socioeconomic positions, as they age. It does so by examining how children's expressed optimism about their ability to achieve their occupational choices can conceal the impact of social structural factors on their choices and dispositions for (non-)action over time. Based on the findings, we argue for a more careful interpretation of children's sense of agency as something that continuously adjusts in contexts of structural inequality.

The empirical study was conducted with a sample of South Korean children aged 10-18.¹ South Korea was chosen as the focus because, after several decades of rapid economic development combined with relatively low levels of socioeconomic inequality (Fields & Yoo, 2000), since the late 1990s, there has been a noticeable increase in income inequality (Lee, 2017). While the impact of rising inequality on South Korean children's sense of their agency no doubt to some extent reflects South Korea's unique social, economic and political contexts, we argue that the

¹ When mentioning children, we include those aged 18 for the convenience of referring to all participants and because, in South Korea, persons reach the legal age of majority at 19.

study provides important new insights that are relevant to research on children in other countries experiencing similar inequalities.

Children's perceptions of their agency in relation to their occupational choices

The model of children's agency underpinning this study is a social and relational one. This model does not see children's agency as constituted by the exercise of wholly free choice or self-directed action. Rather children's agency is understood as being manifested in choices and actions that interact with, and are influenced by, a diverse range of factors including their positions in relation to intersecting axes of inequality such as class, race, gender, disability and the physical environments they inhabit (Valentine, 2011). This is a model of agency that sees children's capacity to act and to make a difference as dependent on and shaped by the relevant social and non-social factors in play in different contexts (Oswell, 2013).

Bandura (2002) argues that, amongst the mechanisms of human agency, none is more central than beliefs concerning 'self-efficacy' – the belief that one has the power to produce desired effects by one's actions. Yet, when evaluating agency, we suggest that putting individuals' expressions of self-efficacy centre-stage can be misleading if what they 'desire' to achieve is heavily influenced by their living conditions. Evidence from research on children's occupational aspirations (which is particularly substantial in the UK) suggests that, although some socioeconomically disadvantaged children aspire to high-status occupations (Croll, 2008; Gore, Holmes, Smith, Fray, McElduff, Weaver & Wallington, 2017), many do not, largely because their family backgrounds play an important role in shaping their aspirations (Archer, DeWitt & Wong, 2014) often from early childhood (Moulton, Flouri, Joshi & Sullivan, 2018). If so, any self-efficacy that children express about their occupational choices may not tell the whole story about their agency.

Studies on older teens' and young adults' views of the efficacy of their agency show that the level of control they feel they have over their future varies across national contexts, suggesting the possible impact of hegemonic public discourses on young people's sense of agency. For example, de Singly (2008) reports lower proportions of young people in France and Japan (22% and 16% respectively) feeling they had complete freedom and control over their future than in the USA and Denmark (51% and 45% respectively). Likewise, in her comparison of English and German young people, Evans (2002) found the former had greater faith in the role of individual effort and ability in shaping their life chances. High levels of optimism about the efficacy of agentic effort have been reported, in particular, among young people in the UK and USA despite low economic growth (Shane & Heckhausen, 2017), and regardless of local labour market opportunities (Rudd & Evans, 1998) or their socio-economic status (Croll, 2008). Some studies have interpreted this as evidence of young people 'buying into' meritocracy, which is a dominant public discourse in these societies (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018; Mendick, Allen & Harvey, 2015).

However, as similar studies with younger children are lacking, we have little evidence on younger children's views of their agency and on whether and how children's sense of their agency changes as they age in different country contexts. This paper contributes to addressing this gap by investigating the case of South Korea with a particular focus on how children's occupational choices and their perceptions of the (in)efficacy of their agency in achieving these choices change over time. In doing so, we mostly focus on occupational 'choices' as opposed to 'aspirations'. This is because, while aspirations can be defined as something that 'provide[s] a degree of impetus and drive for current behaviours and future actions and choices' (Archer, Hollingworth & Mendick, 2010, p.79), they do not always involve choices or actions to achieve them – two key elements typically associated with the exercise of agency.

Furthermore, aspirations, generally understood as what someone *hopes* will happen in the future, can differ from expectations, understood as what they *believe* is likely to happen. When children perceive constraints on the effectiveness of their agency, a divergence between their aspirations and their expectations is created. For example, Cook, Church, Ajanaku, Shadish Jr., Kim and Cohen (1996) found a wider gap between the occupational aspirations and expectations amongst disadvantaged inner-city boys than that amongst other boys in the USA, indicating that the former had a greater consciousness of how structural constraints might reduce their chances of achieving their aspirations. A child's occupational 'choice' that they articulate at any point in time (e.g. when writing it on a questionnaire) can therefore be seen as an outcome of an internal negotiation between their occupational aspirations and expectations, both of which are interwoven with their perceptions of the efficacy of their agency. In turn, children's occupational choices influence the actions they take (or do not take) and, consequently, their occupational outcomes. Children's aspirations, expectations, choices, actions and outcomes are hence interrelated in ways that are mediated by their perceptions of their agency.

Inequality and perceptions of agency in South Korea

South Korea, in the second half of the 20th century, was a society with a strong belief in the effectiveness of individual agency. In a period during which successive levels of formal education became widely available and the economy grew from being one of the poorest in the world to being among the most industrialised, there was a widespread belief that individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, could realise their aspirations and achieve upward social mobility through education and hard work (Seth, 2002; Sorensen, 1994). However, as income inequality has increased, especially since the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s and the ensuing economic restructuring, educational outcomes have become more noticeably influenced by socioeconomic backgrounds (Byun & Kim, 2010; OECD, 2016) and public perceptions of the scope for upward social mobility have declined (Min & Lee, 2017). Although the South Korean government has increased public spending, its responses are still relatively limited, as evidenced by the fact that the rate by which its taxation and social welfare measures are reducing income inequality is lower than the average of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Lee, 2017).

The period of rapid economic growth has also coincided with gradual changes in children's status. Education reforms introduced since the 1990s have resulted in an increased recognition of children's rights in schools (Koo, 2014), and at home their status in relation to adults has almost reversed from the time when children's unquestioning obedience to adult authority was expected (Kim & Montgomery, 2018). Yet wider socioeconomic changes may mean that children's increased levels of autonomy in their immediate social spaces may not translate into greater scope for them to exercise agency over their future life chances.

In one recent cross-national comparative survey of university students (Kim, 2018), only 9.5% of the South Korean respondents identified hard work as the most significant factor in becoming successful, compared to 12.9% in China, 23.2% in Japan and 23.4% in the USA. Conversely 50.5% of the South Korean respondents selected parental wealth as the most significant factor compared to 12.5%, 6.7% and 12.1% in the other three countries respectively. While the generalisability of these findings is unknown, they may reflect concern among young South Koreans about South Korea's increasingly rigid socioeconomic structure and the decreasing scope for individuals to determine their future success by exercising their agency. It is in relation to this context that our study investigated how younger children perceive their chances of achieving their occupational choices and, underlying this perception, how inequality influences

both the construction and adjustment of these choices and, relatedly, their sense of the efficacy of their agency as they age.

Methods

Research design, participants and data collection

To investigate this topic, we used a sequential mixed-methods design (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) that involved a questionnaire survey followed by semi-structured individual interviews with participants selected from those who expressed an interest in being interviewed while completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire explored whether there were any patterns in the relationships between specific structural factors and children's perceptions of their agency, while the interviews sought to obtain in-depth insights into the processes underlying those patterns by probing the reasons why and the contexts in which the children had given particular answers on their questionnaire. To include children from a diverse range of backgrounds, we recruited them from primary, middle (lower secondary) and high (upper secondary) schools in two cities: Seoul, the capital and South Korea's economic, political and cultural centre, and a small coastal city in the southwest (hereafter referred to as 'Marine-city') which was chosen for being relatively distant from Seoul and also economically depressed compared to other cities of similar administrative status. The data collection was conducted between August 2017 and January 2018, after obtaining ethics approval for the project from King's College London.

In total, 862 non-randomly sampled children aged 10-18 completed the questionnaire. As our main interest was the impact of socioeconomic inequality, the list of variables for which we collected information from the children was limited to their age, gender, location (city of residence) and parents' education levels and occupations, alongside the children's desired education level, occupational choice, and the levels of happiness they felt at home and in school (see Table 1). Although academic achievement levels were suspected to be a significant factor, we could not collect sufficiently reliable information on these. Children who were uncertain about their occupational choice or who did not know (or did not want to reveal) either or both of their parents' education levels or occupations left the relevant questions blank. The rate of missing values for these variables ran at 27.5-34% of the participants. However, we found no clear evidence to suggest that these non-responses were non-random.

The 42 follow-up interview participants were selected to reflect as far as possible the characteristics of the overall sample. They consisted of 24 children from Seoul and 18 children from Marine-city. 19 were boys and 23 were girls. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

(Table 1 here)

Data analysis

To explore the children's perceptions of their agency, we analysed their responses to eight questions on the questionnaire (see Table 2): two questions concerning their agency at home and school (Q1, Q2), two concerning their ability to achieve their occupational choices (Q3, Q4) and four concerning whether they have given up a desired occupation for any of four selected reasons

(Q5~Q8). We chose Q1 and Q2 to explore children's general sense of agency in their two main social spaces and Q3 because this question has been typically used in other surveys (e.g. British Household Panel Survey, Korea Welfare Panel Study). We added Q4 to explore children's beliefs in meritocracy (the efficacy of their hard work) and Q5~Q8 to explore whether they have adjusted their occupational choices and their reasons for doing so. We do not consider these eight questions as exhaustive for an examination of children's sense of agency. Rather, we regard them as a heuristic device for generating valuable insights on the relationships between children's occupational choices, perceptions of their agency and socioeconomic position as they age that can be further developed in future research. Children were asked to indicate their answers to these questions on a five-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' and these were coded 1 to 5.

(Table 2 here)

Likewise, the education level data were coded 1 to 5 from 'middle school or less' to 'postgraduate education'. To classify parental occupations, we adapted the UK Office for National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification with the main adjustment being to sub-divide the 'small employer/own account holder' group (e.g. the self-employed, shop-owners) between those with a university education and those without, with the first sub-group being placed above the 'intermediate' occupation group and the second below it. This adjustment was made because this group was diverse in terms of education levels and occupations; and also because an initial analysis found that the responses of the children with parents in this group did not fit with the patterns appearing among those of children from the other groups. Children whose occupational choices fell into this group were categorised similarly based on their desired education levels. Consequently, all occupation data were coded 1 to 8 from 'not-in-employment' to 'higher managerial/administrative/professional'.

While studies in applied social science disciplines often treat ordinal data as metric and use a metric model, debates are ongoing concerning the desirability of this approach (Liddell & Kruschke, 2018). For this paper, we analysed the questionnaire data using both ordinal and linear regression and found that both explained similar sizes of the variances in the children's responses to the eight questions in Table 2 with similar factors being statistically significant. However, for ease of interpretation, and since our assumption is that children's perceptions of their agency are best conceptualised as a continuum (although it was measured on a scale with a limited number of points to choose from to avoid confusing respondents when thinking about their answers), we present findings from the latter.

When conducting a two-stage multiple regression analysis, at step 1 the child's age, gender, location, happiness at home and in school and father's occupation were entered as predictor variables while, at step 2, mother's occupation and the child's occupational choice were added. Because the occupation and education level related variables for both the children and their parents were highly correlated, the former were used as they explained a slightly higher share of the variances in the children's responses. For these variables, when missing values were

substituted with their mean values, the relevant dummies were entered at the same step to explore whether there were differences between those who gave information and those who did not.²

The children's responses to two other questions on the questionnaire about their financial aspirations and expectations were also analysed to explore their perceptions of the wider constraints on them achieving their aspirations (Table 3). Finally, the interview data were analysed thematically using a coding framework which was initially informed by findings from the questionnaire data and then further developed based on the interview data itself.

In the following sections, we begin by discussing how the distribution of the participants' occupational choices and their sense of the wider constraints on them achieving their financial aspirations appeared across different school levels. These findings are then fed into a discussion of the relationship between the structural variables in our study and the children's perceptions of their agency with regard to achieving their occupational choices.

Aspirations, expectations and adjustment

There is considerable evidence that parental socioeconomic status influences children's career aspirations and expectations (Cook, et al, 1996; Whiston & Keller, 2004) and their occupational trajectories and social status in later life (Croll, 2008; Schoon, 2008). While Min & Lee (2017) report some correlations between parental occupations and those of their adult children in their South Korean sample, our data shows how the relationship may develop over time. While their parents' occupations were distributed across all the occupational categories, no child in our sample showed an interest in obtaining a semi-routine or routine occupation, while the majority (about 60%) chose a managerial, administrative or professional job.³ It was mainly high school children who chose 'lower supervisory/technical' occupations, possibly having adjusted their choices from a higher status job they had aspired to when they were younger. Furthermore, while there was no significant relationship at the primary school level, there was an increasing correlation between the child's occupational choice and their parents' (especially the father's) occupations at each subsequent school level, suggesting the increasing influence of parental socioeconomic status in the process by which children adjust their occupational choices as they age.

Likewise, there was a widening gap between the children's financial aspirations and expectations across the successive school levels (Table 3). While this gap was already apparent among primary school children, older children were even less optimistic about their future finances, with the children's financial expectations being significantly different by school level (χ^2 (8, N=862) =17.308, $p=0.027$).⁴ This widening gap may indicate that, as they age, the children themselves become increasingly aware of the constraints associated with achieving what they aspire to and a decreasing level of optimism about their abilities to overcome such constraints. However, as seen

² While the three methods of dealing with missing values – pairwise deletion, list-wise deletion and mean substitution of missing values – produced substantially similar outcomes, we present the outputs from the mean substitution method as this used the largest numbers of cases in the analysis.

³ There were no significant gender differences regarding both the children's occupational choices and their desired education levels.

⁴ There was no gender difference in this regard.

below, the analysis of the children's perceptions of the efficacy of their agency concerning their occupational choices reveals more complex patterns and underlying processes.

(Table 3 here)

Adjusted choices and adapted optimism

The overall sizes of the variances in the children's responses to the questions about their perceptions of agency which our variables explained were modest and ranged between 6.8% and 23.5% (Tables 4-7). Although this may be because we did not include factors which could have helped explain a larger share of the variances, it may also be the case that it is only when children are more fully exposed to the realities of the labour market that their perceptions of the efficacy of their agency more dramatically interact with and are influenced by these realities. Either way, the results, especially in association with the interview data, provide useful insights into the subtle dynamics of some of the factors that contribute to children's perceptions of their agency.

While older children tended to express a greater sense of agency at both home and school (Q1 & Q2), all the children expressed, on average, a lower sense of agency in school, a public space where they may experience more factors beyond their control (the respective means were 3.86 and 3.33, Table 4).⁵ The children who expressed a greater sense of agency at each place also tended to feel happier at each place, indicating a close relationship between children's perceptions of their agency and their sense of happiness or life satisfaction.

The levels of the children's optimism about their ability to achieve a job of their choice (Q3) and their ability to achieve any job that they want if they try hard (Q4) (the respective means were 3.77 and 4.11, Table 5) were not significantly different amongst those of different ages. The higher mean of their positive responses to Q4 compared to Q3 highlights their faith in meritocracy. While a belief in the efficacy of hard work is not problematic in itself, some studies have found that children with system-justifying beliefs (e.g. those concerning the fairness of society), especially those from low-income families, are more likely, as they grow older, to be identified as having low self-esteem or to exhibit classroom behaviour characterised as disruptive (Godfrey, Santos & Burson, 2019).

However, further analysis of the children's responses to the questions concerning having given up a desired occupation for the four selected reasons (Q5-Q8, see Tables 6-7) suggests that the similar levels of 'optimism' expressed by children of different ages about their ability to achieve their occupational choices should not be taken at face value. Instead, these responses should be seen as reflecting the 'adapted' nature of their optimism and sense of agency, as older children were significantly more likely to have given up a desired occupation for each of the four reasons.

While age was the most significant factor, the other factors that showed a consistent pattern in terms of the directions of the above effect included father's occupation and the child's occupational choice. Children with fathers in higher socioeconomic status occupations were less likely to have given up a desired occupation for all the four reasons, with this being significant

⁵ While our study did not focus on the role of school in the construction of and adjustments in children's occupational choices and agency, it is important to note that school is also a significant site that contributes to shaping children's aspirations especially in interaction with wider economic, political and social contexts (e.g. Davidson, 2011; McLeod, 2009).

for thinking they were unable to try hard enough and not knowing what to do to achieve it.⁶ Likewise, the children who chose higher socioeconomic status jobs were less likely to have given up a desired occupation for each of the four reasons, with this being significant for thinking they would not be able to access the required financial support and thinking they were unable to try hard enough to achieve it.

Gender and location showed some consistency in the directions of their effect on children's responses to the four questions. Girls were more likely to have given up a desired occupation except for the reason of not knowing what to do to achieve it, while they were significantly more likely to have done so due to thinking they lacked the required talent. Children in Marine-city, who were generally less optimistic in their answers about their ability to achieve their occupational choices, were more likely to have given up a desired occupation except for the reason of thinking they lacked the required talent, while they were significantly more likely to have done so due to thinking they would not be able to access the required financial support – possibly indicating the impact of living in a small provincial city.

The effect of social structural factors such as age, father's occupation, gender and location on children's perceptions of their agency comprises one mechanism by which agency contributes to reproducing inequality. However, some children, regardless of their family and other structural conditions, appeared to choose to work towards high status occupations, which may illustrate part of a process by which agency can also disrupt the reproduction of inequality (Valentine, 2011) – given that a child's occupational choice had a significant relationship with their perceptions of their agency. In addition to being less likely to have given up a desired occupation for the four selected reasons, those who chose higher socioeconomic status jobs tended to be more optimistic about achieving their occupational choice, with their beliefs in the efficacy of hard work being significantly greater than was the case for those who did not. In time, some of these children may also go on to adjust their choices while others may eventually realise their earlier occupational choices. Fortuitous opportunities and experiences can be involved in explaining differences between these children (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), but the cultivation and utilisation of such opportunities and experiences will, to a significant extent, depend upon the resources (economic, cultural and/or social) available to individuals at the time.

The overall order of the likelihood of the reasons for which children had given up a desired occupation (thinking they lacked the required talent [mean=3.07], thinking they were unable to try hard enough [mean=2.76], not knowing what to do to achieve it [mean=2.40] and thinking they would not be able to access the required financial support [mean=2.13]) suggests that they are more likely to perceive their reasons for having given up a desired occupation as personal rather than structural. Furthermore, the clearer significance of the father's occupation for children who had given up a desired occupation due to thinking they were unable to try hard enough to achieve it rather than due to thinking they would not be able to access the required financial support seems to suggest that socioeconomic status can affect children's dispositions for (non-)action even before they become conscious of more tangible constraints regarding money.

The follow-up interviews provided some more in-depth insights into the nature of the optimism that the children expressed about their ability to achieve their occupational choices and how they adjusted them especially in relation to their socioeconomic status.

⁶ The mother's occupation was not consistent in the directions of the effect and not significant in any case.

(Tables 4~7 here)

Subconsciously adapting or knowingly compromising

It has long been observed that children aged just below their early teens become more aware of their social class and ability and, based on these, eliminate certain occupational aspirations (Gottfredson, 1981). Some of the younger children in our study also showed an awareness of their family's economic conditions and identified their target occupations in relation to this awareness. For example, Hyunsoo aged 11 from Seoul, whose father was a skilled worker with a high school education, consciously excluded jobs which he thought might be expensive to prepare for.⁷

Researcher: What may not be possible, do you mean?

Hyunsoo: Something that costs much money, a job that costs a lot in preparation for it...

Researcher: What sort of jobs do you think that can be?

Hyunsoo: ...I cannot think of any... but I feel that way anyway.

Researcher: When you decide what to become in the future, do you mean you will exclude those jobs that may cost much in preparation?

Hyunsoo: I would have to do so.

Researcher: Would you have to do so? Wouldn't you be able to overcome the cost problem by making an effort?

Hyunsoo: It's not something that I can overcome by making an effort. Even if I make an effort, if money is short, I don't think I would be able to make an effort...

Hyunsoo's statement that his effort would not be sufficient to overcome any financial constraints associated with occupations that are expensive to prepare for might sound as if he did not believe in the efficacy of hard work. However, his positive answer on the questionnaire about his ability to achieve any job he 'wanted' through hard work and his confirmation of this answer during the interview suggests that he simply did not think jobs that cost much to prepare for were those that he 'wanted'. Diverse conceptual resources have been used to explain such preference formations. Looked at through the lens of Bourdieu's (1990a, 1990b) concept of 'habitus' – the unconscious cognitive and bodily bases of action that are structurally inculcated – we might conclude that Hyunsoo was not conscious of why he was forming such preferences; whilst, using the idea of 'adaptive preferences' (Elster, 1982), this response might be interpreted as a 'rational' response to relevant circumstances (Bruckner, 2007).

In comparison with younger children such as Hyunsoo, elements of a more conscious compromise could be observed with some older children, such as Jinyoung, a 15-year-old girl in Marine-city. Jinyoung, whose father was a fisherman, had given up her ambition to become a lawyer:

Jinyoung: Well, that's true, why did I think that... In the first place, such people [lawyers] seemed to be very distant from my life, and even if I became one, I don't feel that I would be successful in the job.

Researcher: You think it would be possible to become one nevertheless.

⁷ Pseudonyms are used for all participants mentioned in this paper to preserve their anonymity.

Jinyoung: I thought I wanted to become a lawyer, but I don't have the confidence, I cannot say for sure that I would be able to make as much effort as is required to make it.

Researcher: Why do you feel that way?

Jinyoung: Frankly, in this country, I think those people who have been managed well from earlier in their childhood become lawyers.

Researcher: Don't you feel any regrets about giving up on the job?

Jinyoung: No, it's not what I want now...

The bitterness in the tone of Jinyoung's voice when she spoke about how families from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds facilitated their children's occupational achievements suggested a clear awareness of the impact of socioeconomic factors on her own life chances. Yet, this awareness was not associated with a disposition for action to overcome it but instead with compromising her ambition. Jinyoung's current occupational choice was to become a social worker and she claimed to be focussing on this and to be optimistic that she could become one if she tried hard. However, upon probing, she said she still would have preferred to become a lawyer if becoming both a lawyer or a social worker were possible, although she felt she was not capable of the level of hard work that would be required to become a lawyer (unlike that required to become a social worker).

Like Hyunsoo, Jinyoung had indicated on the questionnaire that she would be able to achieve any job she wanted if she tried hard. However, by suggesting that she was unable to put in the level of hard work required to become a lawyer (which would involve overcoming the impact of her socioeconomic background), she almost appeared to blame herself for not pursuing this choice. The optimism both Hyunsoo and Jinyoung expressed about their ability to achieve their current occupational choices had been 'adapted' as it related to choices that had been shaped by their socioeconomic conditions. Likewise, the optimism they expressed about the efficacy of hard work in achieving any job they wanted was misleading since it did not apply to those jobs that Hyunsoo had excluded for cost reasons, while Jinyoung did not feel capable of such hard work.

These cases contrasted markedly with that of Shiwon, a 16-year-old girl in Seoul whose father was a lawyer and for whom becoming a lawyer was an alternative choice if, during her time at university, it proved not to be feasible to become an actor. Although it would be competitive to get a place at a law school and to become a government prosecutor afterwards, unlike Jinyoung who thought it was already too late to work towards becoming a lawyer (and Hyunsoo who thought going to a law school was too expensive), Shiwon believed that she could become a lawyer, once it was decided that this was the route she should pursue. Yet, she did not think her family background was any more privileged than other 'ordinary' households across the country or that she was any more advantaged than other students with regard to her ability to pursue her desired occupation.

Shiwon's case, compared to those of Jinyoung and Hyunsoo, illustrates that children's awareness of the impact of socioeconomic factors on people's life chances is not only related to age but can also be influenced by their socioeconomic positions. Despite having the same occupational aspiration and both being, according to self-reported academic attainment, at around the middle of their classes, Jinyoung and Shiwon's different socioeconomic conditions appear to have resulted in different senses of the efficacy of their agency – while Hyunsoo's socioeconomic condition, despite him being positioned towards the top of his class academically, led him to not even consider becoming a lawyer. These children's senses of the (in)efficacy of their agency are important, not only because of the association between a sense of efficacy and wellbeing in the

here and now, but because they will subsequently influence the likelihood of their taking action to attain their aspirations and, eventually, the likelihood of them realising them.

Conclusion

While there is now a fairly substantial international body of empirical research that has explored the level of control young people feel they have over their futures, this existing work has largely focussed on older teens and young adults and has tended to neglect the perspectives of younger children and the question of whether and how children's sense of agency changes as they age. The research reported in this paper sought to address this gap by using the case of South Korea to explore whether and how children's occupational choices and their perceptions of the (in)efficacy of their agency in achieving these choices change over time. Informed by a conceptualisation of children's agency as social and relational and using a sequential mixed-methods design, our study has illuminated the propensity of children's sense of agency to be frustrated and adjusted as they consciously and subconsciously negotiate various aspects of their social environments. The subtle process of adjustment that appeared in our South Korean sample's occupational choices and their dispositions for (non-)action concerning these indicates the increasing role of structural constraints in shaping their sense of agency as they age.

Our findings on the influence of age and socioeconomic position alongside other structural factors on adjustments in children's sense of agency have both theoretical and practical relevance beyond the South Korean context. In terms of their theoretical relevance, they suggest that, when researching children's agency in contexts of structural inequality, the optimism children express about the efficacy of their agency should not be taken at face value, but rather requires careful interpretation. More specifically, it requires a sensitivity to the possibility of an 'adapted optimism'; that is, one related to the realisation of ambitions that have been previously compromised in the light of structural constraints.

Understanding the underlying history and the nuanced and changing nature of children's agency is also of practical importance. In particular, such understandings can inform interventions by public and civil institutions that are concerned with improving children's educational and other social (e.g. occupational) outcomes and their subjective wellbeing. Such interventions would ideally be based on an examination of both children's aspirations and expectations and their perceptions of the constraints on achieving their ambitions which underlie their expressed choices. To prevent children from making unnecessary compromises, these might combine, for example, schemes that help offset the costs of further study and/or preparations for certain occupations with educational measures that help develop a critical awareness of any remaining constraints and the actions that children and others might take, individually and collectively, to address them.

Finally, it is important to note that, having used a cross-sectional research design, we could only examine what the participating children remembered or perceived concerning their past experiences of adjustments in their sense of agency. To explore the relevant processes further and in greater depth, longitudinal mixed-methods research is required to quantitatively and qualitatively track changes in children's aspirations, expectations, choices, actions and outcomes over time. Such research could also usefully examine the role and effects of children's critical awareness of the impact of structural factors on their life chances and its association with wider public discourses on inequality and meritocracy.

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